

The U.S. Must Listen to the People of Egypt

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Articles & Testimony

Dina Guirguis discusses the rhetoric of and the piecemeal U.S. response to the Cairo demonstrations.

When it comes to Egypt, the United States remains ten steps behind the game. On Friday, Hosni Mubarak delivered a belated speech where he delivered, rather indifferently, the hackneyed set of promises the NDP has been pushing for over a decade now -- all while Egypt has deteriorated on virtually every development and human rights indicator. In response, the Egyptian people have unequivocally declared their resilience and continued their unanimous demand that Mubarak -- and his regime symbols, including newly appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman -- depart.

Meanwhile, as the U.S. administration struggles to keep up with a set of fluid and explosive events, it is becoming painfully obvious that there was no strategy on the part of the U.S. except to respond in piecemeal fashion to the power play on the ground, attempting, until Sunday, a delicate rhetorical balancing game in case its strongest ally in the Middle East, the Mubarak regime, loses. Meanwhile, throughout the events, the administration refused to fully relinquish its insistence on "working with the regime" to implement "needed reforms." But even after Secretary Clinton today called for a "peaceful, orderly transition to a democratic regime," and "free and fair elections," marking a definitive shift in U.S. rhetoric away from the regime (and towards the people), most of Washington's talking heads still show a galling myopia indicating that no lessons are being learned from Egypt's people's revolution, being dubbed the "Lotus Revolution."

Still mired in ancient "democracy vs. stability" arguments, with pro-democracy advocates arguing in favor of principled U.S. foreign policy and stability advocates citing Egypt's critical role in combating terrorism, maintaining peace (and a secure border) with Israel, securing the Suez Canal for U.S. and Israeli interests, and resisting Iranian hegemony, Washington pundits are missing the point.

Egyptians, and arguably the peoples of the entire region, are moving toward change they see as critical whether the U.S. likes it or not. And the U.S. has little to say or do about it because it has blindly bet against history and against the unyielding desire of human beings of all races to live in dignity and freedom. For years we Egyptian democracy advocates have argued in favor of peaceful political reform in Egypt while successive U.S. administrations, some more blindly than others, dismissed our calls and warnings of Egypt's disintegrating social compact that could lead to an explosion. While we tried to convey that attending to Egypt's internal situation was not just the right thing to do but absolutely critical to avoid a collapse of the region's largest country, foreign powers, perhaps betraying racist tendencies, refused to listen.

While no one can fully predict the outcome of the events in Egypt, what is clear is that the tables have turned and now the U.S., and the world, is being compelled to listen to the people of Egypt, who will determine Egypt's future. What is also clear is that these protests have defied every expectation: they are largely secular (not insignificant in a country whose largest opposition group is religiously based); they are by and large peaceful; and they are demonstrating an undying resolve in the face of a brutal security apparatus and regime push back. Eye-witness reports indicate that the security apparatus is resorting to using plainclothes thugs to terrorize, through attacks on personal property, killings, and even rape, the Egyptian people back into submission, and yet the protests continue to grow.

The United States and the world need to understand that, contrary to popular perception, the Mubarak regime has not been a guarantor of stability in the region, or truly helped in advancing U.S. regional interests. Fueling anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment in its official media for years, repressing dissent and ensuring the growth of extremism, and suppressing and persecuting its minorities while attempting to pit the Egyptian people against one another have contributed to serious instability and extremism not just in the country but across the region. Furthermore, the regime's being consumed with staying in power has allowed it to lose interest and clout in foreign policy matters, rendering Egypt an ineffective partner for the United States. This is evidenced by Egypt's inability, for example, to bring about a unity government in Palestine or to defend its rights to Nile waters, two issues the impotence of Egypt on which would have been previously unthinkable.

Now as Egyptians struggle to forge a different future and attempt to reclaim their country from corruption, weakness, and political repression, the international community ought to stand with the reasonable demands of the Egyptian opposition before a descent into inexorable chaos truly becomes imminent. Namely they ought to support the immediate removal of Mubarak, and the formation of a national salvation government comprised of various political forces to be negotiated by ex IAEA chief Mohamed El Baradei, the drafting of a new Constitution enshrining respect for freedom, human rights, pluralism and true citizenship, and the holding of free elections within an agreed upon timetable. These demands are reasonable and the only guarantor at this point of a "peaceful and orderly transition." They are the only way to ensure that Egypt remains committed to its international commitments and are the closest we have to true guarantors of stability. Let us hope the pragmatists in the administration and beyond understand this much.

Dina Guirguis is the Keston Family research fellow in The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas. \(/template102.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra%3A%20Defeating%20Extremism%20through%20the%20Power%20of%20Ideas&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D24&...](#)

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